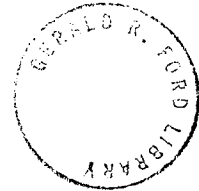




UNITED STATES MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS

799 UNITED NATIONS PLAZA
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10017

January 20, 1976



Ms. Karen Keesling
Director, Office of Women's Programs
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Karen,

I am sure you followed with keen interest the decision of the UN General Assembly last month to launch a Decade for Women, to carry out the plans laid in International Women's Year. As a fellow-member of our delegation to the Mexico City Conference, I thought you would like a first-hand account from the "front lines".

The General Assembly got underway this fall with both pluses and minuses. On the plus side, there was a strong carry-over of motivation and determination from Mexico City: many delegations -- not least of them our own -- came prepared to follow through. Also on the plus side was the atmosphere generated by the Special Session on development and international economic cooperation which took place the first two weeks of September, on the eve of the regular session. As you know, the Session can be chalked up as a very considerable success -- for the United Nations and for the United States. A consensus resolution emerged, showing that despite many deep-seated differences of outlook between developed and developing nations, the two groups were able to agree, at least for the time, to travel the road of cooperation and compromise rather than confrontation. Thus we entered the regular session of the Assembly in an aura of good feeling.

Unfortunately the Assembly then took a disastrous political turn. The references to Zionism in the Declaration of Mexico City were a foretaste of things to come. The Third Committee -- concerned with social

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and humanitarian affairs where the chief discussion of IWY took place -- became highly politicized. It was this Committee that passed the grievous resolution decreeing Zionism to be a form of racism and racial discrimination, which cast a deep shadow over the whole Assembly session. Subsequent issues in the Third Committee were likewise highly politicized. Thus when the women's items, the last to be considered, came up in late November, the atmosphere in the Committee was highly charged. It is a tribute to the deep commitment of a broad spectrum of delegations that discussion of the women's issues was on the whole businesslike and germane.

Carmen Maymi, Director of the Women's Bureau and a member of the U. S. Delegation to the Assembly, was our spokesperson on women's issues. Her principal statements are attached. Pat Hutar, who came as frequently as other commitments permitted, Shirley Hendsch, and I were active particularly in negotiations with other delegations and the Secretariat. Gayle Oechslein, a young officer in the Mission who, while she had not been at Mexico City, quickly familiarized herself with the substance, provided invaluable staff support. So did other members of the Mission.

Our principal objective was General Assembly endorsement of the World Plan of Action and the establishment of machinery to monitor its implementation through a UN Decade for Women. We also wanted to focus on the role of women in development, and on the United Nations itself as an "equal rights" employer, following through on U.S. initiatives at the Mexico City Conference. Of the ten resolutions and one committee decision adopted by the Assembly, the United States supported eight, voted against two, and abstained on one.

Our chief problem with the important omnibus resolution related to the Zionism issue, referred to, as you recall, in the Declaration of Mexico and in one of the thirty-five conference resolutions. Many delegations wanted to endorse all action taken at the Conference; we of course did not. What finally emerged from extensive negotiations was a workmanlike, non-polemic resolution reflecting much effort on the part of the third-world drafters. It went a considerable way, but not the whole way, toward meeting our concerns.

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The result was that the U.S. voted against operative paragraphs 1 and 2 of the omnibus resolution -- which could be interpreted as giving blanket endorsement to all the documents of Mexico City -- and abstained on the resolution as a whole. A sizable number of other countries joined us in these votes, thus demonstrating their determination not to let the laudable UN action for women be contaminated with the Zionism issue. In our explanation of vote we made this clear, as well as the fact that we wholeheartedly support the Decade for Women and implementation of the World Plan of Action.

Initiatives on women in development won wide approval. The employment of women in the United Nations fared less well. A resolution was passed, but with some of its teeth extracted. There is still considerable resistance to taking concrete steps within the United Nations itself to improve the status of women employees, in part because developing countries fear that an increase in women staff will come chiefly from the developed countries.

These are difficult days in the United Nations. The fact that, at the height of polemics and confrontation, nations were able to agree to move forward on the Plan of Action and Decade for Women says much in my view for the solidarity evident on the women's issues. The extent to which the great goals of International Women's Year are reached will of course depend primarily on member governments and on countless organizations and individuals around the world. That record has yet to be written. But the United Nations has shown that it can be an articulator of shared ideals, a catalyst to strengthen motivation, reinforce determination, and lay the groundwork for action.

Finally, let me say how much I enjoyed working with you at the Conference. I was proud of our delegation and of the U.S. performance. Certainly none of us has any illusions that what lies ahead will be easy. But I hope and believe that ten years from now we shall look back at Mexico City and feel that we participated in an historic event.

With all best wishes for the New Year,

Sincerely,

Barbara M. White
Ambassador
Alternate U.S. Representative
for Special Political Affairs

Enclosures: See attached sheet

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